

## Hudson Valley Writers

REVIEW: *Prima Materia Volume 4: Speeding Through the Night* (Bliss Plot Press, 2005, Brent Robison, Editor)

By Dennis Doherty

When a writer ventures into the great unknown of the submission process, sending those beloved but "rambling brats"—in Anne Bradstreet's words—out to the mercies of the literary world, there is often the cringing trepidation as to how they'll be received. Sometimes there's the little thrill of an acceptance letter, and later, the heartskip of seeing an offspring in print. The next step is seeing how they stand amid company in an anthology. If the works around them are bereft of resonant language or nuanced, layered suggestion, or are sentimental or shrill, you wonder how you have failed, tricked by back-handed compliment into such company. But if surrounded by the mature, the bright, the well-schooled, your thrill is doubled to see your baby in the front row, the head of the class, ushered by a capable editor. Further, if the whole of the works are chosen and ordered by their relation to one another, in how they are threaded through and speak to one another, then they take their place as part of a larger whole in the overarching dialogue that is literature.

*Speeding Through the Night*, Volume 4 of the anthology *Prima Materia*, is such an achievement. Publisher/editor Brent Robison has carefully created an anthology of Hudson Valley writers whose individual works shine within a book that collectively creates a unified experiment. The experience of moving through these stories, poems, and memoirs is that of irresistible forward motion (as the title suggests) struggling with contemplation of the past—often childhood or its reflection in current children—while being impelled toward an uncertain future. The opening poem and story bear apocalyptic visions of personal grief and a world doomed, along with their attendant considerations of religion and spirituality, and the bookend—while still rocketing toward some destination on the other side of darkness—is a story and a poem with visions of well-loved babies in moments of safety, happiness. While many of the journeys explore the byways of our hometowns and local geography, they also take us down the river and across the seas, spanning space as well as time. Hence, the world contracts; the local and individual become universal.

To wit: the opening piece of the volume, "God's Little Ticker," a long prose poem by Lynn Behrendt, begins: "In 1979 my brother died somewhere in Cape Cod...and they hit a tree and my brother supposedly died instantly." But what follows is a long, breathless series of memories that posits what might have flashed before his eyes at the moment of impact. Those unpunctuated "ands" joining independent clauses are an indication of the speed at which the poem proceeds, Faulknerian in its density, an almost stream-of-consciousness if not for the crystalline particularity of detail and the thrust of its considerations.

This is followed by Susan Piperato's "Glue," in which a frazzled and somewhat overwhelmed single mother takes her sassy and precocious kids to the mall for glue (involving a school project about Confucius) and shoes, tellingly, in the aftermath of a recent shooting (Hudson Valley Mall last spring?). Its frenetic pace tries to balance, like so many shopping bags and shoe boxes, the mundane bustle with thoughts of war, god, institutions, love, while the children speak glibly of the end of the world at a site of recent random violence. Yes, she somehow seems to hold it all together.

Near the end of the book the threads appear to be unraveling toward hopelessness, and one wonders if editor Robison has begun to despair. Jo Salas's story "Ice" seems to reach the apex (or nadir) of naturalism and existential absurdity, as unendurable tragedy and life trajectory are affected by ordinary plans and simple mistakes.

But then enter Mark Morgenstern's "Zen Master of the Hudson Valley" and the happenstance meeting of a hack-for-hire interviewing a dubious "Zen therapist" along with his thug-like partner Gus—shady characters indeed, as the mutual distrust and dislike grows with verbal parrying and metaphorical word-play. And just when the quirky, funny satire of our local culture with its spiritual credulity reaches its own comic absurdity, common humanity is unmasked and the possibility for communal love is revealed in the form of a laughing, soiled baby girl, though tempered by a cabbage head punted into a bloody sunset.

At last, the entire project is redeemed in empathic connection by Anne Richey's generous and fetching poem "Trailways," the final contemplation here, in which a woman on a bus observes a protective father sleeping with his arms around his children and imagines him "as my partner in love for the duration/ of the trip." And the cycle begins anew, this time in attentive care and hope, the sweet envoy from the anthology's dark night.

*Prima Materia: Speeding Through the Night* is available at local bookstores and online at [blissplotpress.com](http://blissplotpress.com).

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